

Min Joung-Ki, Healing Minds with Paintings of Mudeung Mountain

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Established in 1995, the Gwangju Biennale has risen to become one of the premier events in international contemporary art, continuously presenting cutting-edge artworks that embody the spirit of Gwangju while exploring diverse contemporary discourses. In 2021, the thirteenth Gwangju Biennale was held at various sites in downtown Gwangju, including the Biennale Exhibition Hall, Gwangju National Museum, Horanggasy Artpolygon, Gwangju Theater, and the former Armed Forces Gwangju Hospital. For thirty-nine days in April and May, sixty-nine artists (or teams) from forty-three countries explored the theme of “Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning,” presenting visitors with a dazzling array of works emphasizing the importance of plurality and the sense of community embedded within global life systems, shamanism, indigenous lifestyles, and alternative social relations.

This year’s Gwangju Biennale featured eleven Korean artists (or teams), three of whom—Min Joung-Ki, Moon Kyungwon, and Kim Sylbee—produced new works through the support of the GB Commission. These three artists and their new works are now the subjects of in-depth articles by TheArtro. The first article looks at two newly commissioned works by Min Joung-Ki—〈Poetic Circles’ Pavilions in Mudeung Mountain〉 (2020) and 〈Altar of Heaven in Mudeung Mountain〉 (2020)—in the context of earlier works from the 1980s and 1990s. The second article introduces the latest installment of Moon Kyungwon’s 〈Promise Park〉 (2021), a series that she has been working on since 2015, and the third article focuses on Kim Sylbee’s new video installation 〈Unindebted Life〉 (2021).

With the theme of “Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning,” many of the featured works at the 2021 Gwangju Biennale were aimed at soothing people’s mind and soul. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the thirteenth Gwangju Biennale was originally scheduled to be held in 2020. Notably, that would have marked the fortieth anniversary of the May 18 Democratic Uprising in Gwangju, a crucial event in the history of Korea’s democratization movement that remains a source of deep national trauma. Min Joung-Ki, who has been painting landscapes since the 1990s, expressed his intention to commemorate these memories in two new works on the theme of Mudeung Mountain: 〈Altar of Heaven in Mudeung Mountain〉 (2020) and 〈Poetic Circles’ Pavilions in Mudeung Mountain〉 (2020).



Exhibition view of Gwangju Biennale. Image provided by Gwangju Biennale.

A little more than 1,000 meters tall, Mudeung Mountain is not particularly steep or towering, but it still holds great symbolic power for the people of Gwangju. With a wide ridge that spreads out in all four directions, spanning Gwangju, Damyang, and Hwasun, the mountain is revered as the bosom of the entire region. By capturing this maternal strength and spirit in his paintings, Min Jung-Ki embraces the memories, stories, and lives of the local people.

All of the landscapes that Min Jung-Ki paints are places that he has actually explored with both his feet and his eyes. Despite being in his seventies, the artist continues to strap on his hiking boots to climb Korea's many mountains. Before painting these two works, he extensively hiked the ridges and valleys of Mudeung Mountain, learning both the topography of the land and the stories of the people living there. This approach is reflected in the title of Min's 2004 solo exhibition at the ARKO Art Center, *Walk Scape*. Through such attitude, Min Jung-Ki links himself to the rich tradition of East Asian landscapes, which sought to visualize one's own footsteps in nature.

Rather than focusing on a single perspective, traditional East Asian landscapes simultaneously include different points of view, depicting the area as it might be seen through the course of an entire walk. This approach allows the viewer to enter the painting and fully experience what the artist saw and felt while walking through the landscape. Notably, this coexistence of viewpoints has been a defining characteristic of Min Jung-Ki's paintings since the 1990s.

As Min once said, "Painting a landscape is not only describing what's visible, but also representing history as a means of communicating between the past and present. I'm not trying to feel nostalgia, but to paint the landscape of today through the remnants of the past and traces of humans left in nature." These words aptly describe what Min seeks to express in his landscapes.



LEFT Min Jung-Ki, <Altar of Heaven in Mudeung Mountain> 2020,
RIGHT Min Jung-Ki, <Poetic Circles' Pavilions in Mudeung Mountain> 2020,
 Photo : Ahn Chun Ho, Image provided by Kukje Gallery.

Mudeung Mountain is a sacred place where special ceremonies have been held since the time of the Silla Kingdom, more than 1000 years ago. As such, the mountain is the site of the "Altar of Heaven," where people have prayed for rain and the safety and prosperity of the nation since ancient times. Min Jung-Ki portrays this sacred site in <Altar of Heaven in Mudeung Mountain> (2020), which shows the path from Ipseok Village and Mujinsanseong Fortress to the Altar of Heaven, located above Jeungsimsa Temple and Yaksam Hermitage. Capturing the full spirit of Mudeung Mountain, Min also included the Seoseokdae cliffs beyond the alter, and the cool spray of Yongchu Falls on the right. With this lovely and powerful scene, the artist expresses his belief that the heart of Korea, still wounded by the May 18 Democratic Uprising, can be healed by the communal prayers and aspirations offered at the Altar of Heaven.

Then in <Poetic Circles' Pavilions in Mudeung Mountain> (2020), Min painted a bird's-eye view of Mudeung Mountain, emphasizing its enormous width. From this perspective, the sprawling mountain ridges, valleys, waterways, and roads seem to be connected like the trunk of a huge tree. The scenic valleys and hillsides include places like Soswaewon Garden and Sigyeongjeong Pavilion, where the Joseon literati cultivated their minds and bodies, as well as paths used by the uibyeong resistance during the Imjin War against Japan in the sixteenth century. As such, the work demonstrates why a knowledge of history is necessary to understanding Min Jung-Ki's paintings. In Min's painting, which resembles an ancient map, the various historic sites within the ridges and valleys of Mudeung Mountain are rendered as bright pink flowers in full bloom. By shining a spotlight on such places, Min draws attention to the people who have lived there throughout history. Indeed, these valleys, reservoirs, and hills are saturated with the lives of countless ordinary people whose names cannot be found in any history books. In summoning such memories, Min induces viewers to recall their own stories and experiences of Mudeung Mountain. As such, his pictorial plane is filled with much more than a mere landscape.



LEFT Min Jung-Ki, <Rumor II>, 1980, oil in canvas, 130 X 162cm.

RIGHT Min Jung-Ki, <On the street- People>, acryl in canvas, 145 X 224cm, Image provided by artist.

At the Gwangju Biennale, these two new paintings were shown alongside earlier works that exemplify Min's artistic vision and trajectory. In particular, <Byeokgye Nine Banded Stream> (1992) and <Four Seasons in Seohu> (1992) were exhibited in the first gallery, while <On the Street – People> (1983) and <Rumor II> (1980) were shown in the third gallery.

Around 1980, Min Joung-Ki painted several works of his *_Rumor_* series, including *⟨Rumor II⟩* (1980), which shows two vaguely human figures with a scattered assortment of misplaced eyes, ears, and mouths. Rather than looking straight ahead, the eyes anxiously scan in all directions, while the ears are perked up, as if to gather gossip from every direction. The image thus seems to visualize the old Korean saying about rumors: "Even without feet, words can travel a thousand miles." Indeed, these strange eyes and ears, arbitrarily attached to figures without hands and feet, seem to be traveling somewhere. Meanwhile *⟨On the Street – People⟩* (1983) shows a crowd of people looking exhausted and disconnected, cut off from one another by a brick wall. Together, these two works evoke the social atmosphere of the 1980s, when Min Joung-Ki was one of the leaders of Minjung art, a movement dedicated to using realist art to criticize social problems and promote democratization. In particular, Min was an active member of the art group "Reality and Utterance,"¹⁾ one of the most important groups of Minjung art²⁾.



Min Joung-Ki, *⟨Four Seasons in Seohu⟩*(3 pieces), 200X240cm, 1992. Image provided by artist.

Since moving into his studio in Seohu-ri, Yangpyeong, Gyeonggi Province in 1987, Min Joung-Ki has been painting the surrounding rice fields, mountains, and valleys. But more than just landscapes, his works tell the story of the land and the people who live there. For example, <Four Seasons in Seohu> (1992) shows the people of Seohu-ri working within the very foundation of their lives throughout the year: plowing fields in spring, planting rice in summer, harvesting in autumn, and peacefully enjoying the snow in winter. In the center of the painting, the streams and mountains of Seohu-ri are depicted in the format of a traditional map, which is marked with the places that locals see and inhabit in all four seasons, such as North Hangang River, South Hangang River, Mountain Yumyeong, and Mountain Yongmun.



Min Joung-Ki, <Byeokgye Nine Bended Stream>, 200X336cm, 1992.

Photo : Ahn Chun Ho, Image provided by Kukje Gallery.

In <Byeokgye Nine Bended Stream> (1992), Min shows the famous winding stream in Yangpyeong from its first bend (Oesuiip) to its ninth bend (Iljuam). Again taking the format of an antique map, the painting commemorates Yi Hangro, a Neo-Confucian scholar in the late Joseon Dynasty, and his pupils Choi Ikhyeon and Yang Heonsu, who resisted imperialist invasions at the end of the nineteenth century. The work may thus be read as a historical painting that tells an important story embedded in the lives of the region.

In his landscapes, Min Joung-Ki wants to arouse the memories and stories of local people, ranging from ordinary farmers diligently working the land to heroes who gave their lives to protest inequity and oppression. His landscapes provoke us to remember history, which is nothing less than the lives of those who came before us. In remembering them, we strengthen our connection to the past while rethinking our lives in the present. This powerful sensation was surely felt by everyone who encountered Min Joung-ki's paintings of Mudeung Mountain at the Gwangju Biennale in 2021.

1)Minjung art was a prominent movement of the 1980s, dedicated to works and activities with a social theme. Major groups include Reality and Utterance, the Gwangju Free Artists Association, Dureong, Imsul Year, and Ganeunpae. Eschewing personal expression, Minjung artists addressed collective topics such as history, labor, agriculture, and feminism, emphasizing direct communication with the public through prints, murals, and geolgae (hanging paintings).

2)Established in 1979, Reality and Utterance was a leading group of the Minjung art movement of the 1980s, actively promoting the social role and message of art. Fouding artists included Oh Yoon, Kim Jungheun, Joo Jaehwan, Kim Yongtae, Min Joung-Ki, who were joined by four critics: Choi Min, Won Dong-seok, Sung Wangyung, and Yun Beommo. Believing that art must serve a social function, Min and his colleagues in Reality and Utterance rebuked the practices of abstract art while focusing on themes of social criticism.